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ABSTRACT

In order to understand the market climate for speech majors, the Department of Speech at the University of Houston conducted a survey to assess the marketability of speech communication graduates in the Greater Houston area. It further attempted to disclose the skills needed to increase employability. Seventy-one questionnaires, designed to focus upon some aspect of the total employment qualifications of the speech communication major, were completed and returned by fourteen different types of companies, national or international in size and extensiveness of operation. The results revealed that very few majors were hired from areas other than Business Administration and Engineering. Employers hire predominantly from areas where students are immediately qualified for a specific job. At least two observations can be made from these data: (1) speech majors will improve their employability by having courses which make them more qualified to perform a definite job; and (2) the type of job and the type of business concern should be decided upon early in each student's academic development. Speech communication majors were perceived as having high employment potential in departments or skill areas most dependent upon communication skills. (LL)

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EMPLOYER IMAGES OF SPEECH COMMUNICATION MAJORS: A QUESTION OF EMPLOYABILITY

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The labor market for many types of employees has become increasingly restricted during the past five years. This decline in employability, in part, reflects the state of the national economy and, in part, reflects the impact of more college graduates seeking proportionately fewer jobs requiring a college education. This labor market has been generally unwelcoming for students who have majored in the Humanities, Fine Arts, and Social Sciences. Regardless of the causative factors behind the unfavorable market, university and college educators must take these conditions into account when creating curriculum and when advising students concerning their career development. This conclusion is even true for times when the labor market is less unfavorable.

Several programs have been conducted at national and regional speech communication association conventions to understand and create strategies for improving the employability of speech communication majors. At least one study has been initiated by the Speech Communication Association to study labor market suitability of speech communication graduates.

To understand the market climate for speech majors the Department of Speech at the University of Houston conducted a survey to assess the marketability of speech communication graduates in the Greater Houston area. Hopefully, this report adds additional understanding and insight into the problems of producing well-educated majors with a blend of the humanities

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and social sciences in the liberal arts tradition at a time when such college graduates are becoming increasingly difficult to place in business and industry.

The motives for the study should not be misinterpreted. No interest exists for preparing speech communication majors for careers at the expense of maintaining a humanistic commitment to education of the total individual. The study does not reflect a desire of making such majors "trade" oriented. Instead, in addition to the objectives of achieving a humanistic education, the department has a commitment to help students maximize their employability. To meet this end, analysis must produce understanding of the constraints and conditions of employability.

Instead of relying upon questions such as "Do you have a job for, and would you hire, speech communication majors?" the effort was to disclose employer perceptions of such majors as an employability index. No consideration was made of the availability of jobs; rather the survey was conceived to reveal certain basic images held by members of industrial concerns toward speech graduates' employability. The fundamental assumption was that if speech communication majors appear employable to employers, they will be hired if jobs are available. Essentially, the survey sought to determine the competitive employability of speech majors and to disclose the skills needed to increase employability.

Secondly, the survey was designed to determine whether potential employers accurately understood the skills and training characteristic of speech communication majors. If not, how could this and other departments more effectively inform potential employers of graduates' skills? How could majors be trained and advised to compete more adequately in the labor market by meeting employer expectations and needs?

The survey consisted of an explanatory cover letter and a two-page questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into subsections, each of which was designed to focus upon some aspect of the total employment qualifications of the speech communication major. The letter was addressed by name to the director of personnel for two reasons. The companies surveyed are too large and complex to survey those people in every division who interview and recommend new personnel. It was assumed that Directors of Personnel are knowledgeable of and influence company-wide hiring policies in most major companies, especially when hiring non-technical employees. The survey was mailed to 146 companies in the Greater Houston area. Many of these companies are national or international in size and extensiveness of operation. The questionnaire was sent to local concerns such as banks and medical facilities which are sizable, hiring over 100 persons each.

Of the 146 questionnaires mailed, seventy-one were completed and returned. Fourteen different types of companies were reached by the questionnaire. By category of services performed, the following types of companies responded to the questionnaire:

(1) Financial	22	(8) Research	1
(2) Utilities	2	(9) Food services	3
(3) Energy	5	(10) Transportation	1
(4) Engineering	15	(11) Personnel	1
(5) Medical	6	(12) Plastics manufacturing	1
(6) Retail	9	(13) Consulting (engineering)	1.
(7) Insurance	15		

The responding companies cover a wide range of services and products. Because they are large, national and international, the findings of this study may be valuable to people in locations who intend to place graduates

with such companies as Texaco, Gulf, Mobil, major utility companies, insurance, and other financial institutions.

These companies were asked to indicate the academic disciplines from which they drew most of their employees. The following categories were indicated:

(1) Engineering	24	(6) Technology	8
(2) Business Administration	49	(7) Health Sciences	4
(3) Social Sciences	4	(8) Natural Sciences	1
(4) Humanities	3	(9) Hotel and Restaurant	
(5) Fine Arts	1	Management	1.

Very few majors are hired from areas other than Business Administration and Engineering. As potential employers, the respondents can be characterized in two ways. They hire predominantly from areas where students are immediately qualified for a specific job. Qualified is a labor market concept referring to an applicant's having attained specific skills and theory with which he or she can perform a specific job with little or no immediate training. In contrast, employees may be qualifiable, which means that they have minimum skills but need considerable additional training to serve fully in the company. This study suggests that training in business administration is at least requisite for being qualifiable. This observation suggests that non-technical and non-business administration graduates would improve their qualifiability by familiarity with these disciplines. Such familiarity can, in most universities, be developed through skillful use of electives and by taking a realistic approach to acquiring employable skills and knowledge.

To acquire information to use in increasing the qualifiability of speech communication majors, the respondents were asked to indicate the

areas of study, auxiliary to general speech courses, which should be taken to increase employability. These areas were suggested:

(1) Marketing	8	(9) Technical Fields (unspecified)	2
(2) Business Administration	7	(10) Management	1
(3) Psychology	4	(11) Accounting	3
(4) Computer Science	2	(12) Corporate Communication	1
(5) Mathematics	2	(13) Finance	1
(6) Engineering	4	(14) Real Estate	1
(7) Personnel	2	(15) Economics	3
(8) Sociology	1	(16) Political Science	1

At least two observations can be made from these data. First, speech majors will improve their employability by having courses which make them more qualified to perform a definite job. Marketing, knowledge of administrative concepts, principles, and procedures, technical information, and breadth in the Social Sciences, depending upon the specific job, should increase employability. Each career objective will demand a different set of courses aimed toward the acquisition of principles and skills characteristic of the job description. Secondly, the type of job and the type of business concern should be decided upon early in each student's academic development. Auxiliary courses, either concentrated in one area or strategically drawn from a variety of disciplines, should be aimed at increasing qualifiability. Prospective employers expected to find speech students studying subject matter in the Social Sciences and in Business Administration. In fact, background in these areas is expected.

Aside from these demographic data concerning the types of companies and the areas of hiring, the survey sought to disclose the images held by potential employers of speech communication majors. Specifically, the

effort was made to determine employer perception of the skills and theory acquired by speech majors. The responses were:

1. Speech majors study to improve their diction, articulation, and pronunciation.

great deal 19.4% 38.8% 31.9% 5.5% 4.1% very little

2. Speech majors study the psychological and sociological aspects of communication.

great deal 33.3% 33.3% 27.7% 4.1% 1.3% very little

3. Speech majors study the principles of persuasion.

great deal 29.1% 43.0% 18.0% 8.3% 1.3% very little

4. Speech majors study communication problems as they exist in business and industry.

great deal 25.0% 41.6% 18.0% 9.7% 5.5% very little

The extent to which employers' images of speech communication major training accurately reflects the curriculum studied depends upon departments' differences. Some general observations are warranted, however. An image of speech students practicing voice skills still prevails; additionally, this is not a very marketable skill. Employers may expect more knowledge in organizational and business communication principles than is provided by most departments. Only recently has there been a trend in this area of training.

The questionnaire sought to determine what jobs speech communication majors were qualified to fill. Personnel development and training appear to be the departments most likely to hire speech communication majors. According to the perception of the skills and knowledge possessed by speech communication majors, they most likely would end up in personnel development. Prospective employers believed that speech majors could train other employees

in platform speaking (90.2%), inter-office communication (77.7%), interpersonal communication (80.5%), and assisting other personnel in orally presenting bids (56.9%). Other contributions were likely to be made in training fellow employees in meeting management (41.3%), conducting workshops on telephone courtesy and protocol (6[illegible]%), conducting workshops on sales techniques (52.7%), and preparing company personnel for press conferences (51.3%).

Also, contributions could be made in company image-building campaigns (48.6%). Respondents believed (63.8%) that majors could conduct company-oriented programs for public school students. Nearly half (44.4%) of the respondents believed that speech majors could analyze communication breakdowns within the company. Nearly a third (30.5%) saw speech majors as serving as parliamentarians for company meetings. Although the respondents might acknowledge that speech majors possessed communication skills, they were not viewed as being equipped to interview prospective employees (26.3%). Probably lacking was the technical information to evaluate employee qualification.

To determine which skills employees perceive speech majors as possessing, the respondents were asked to rank on a scale (one to five, with five indicating high potential) the departments or skill areas in which speech communication majors could most effectively perform. Respondents were asked to assess the potential of success in several skill areas or departments. The following responses were made:

(1) Public relations	4.45	(5) Personnel relations	3.78
(2) Sales	4.08	(6) Marketing	3.43
(3) Customer relations	4.08	(7) Personnel development	3.33
(4) Training	3.98	(8) Managerial	3.08

(9) Analytical	2.10	(13) Shipping	1.31
(10) Purchasing	2.10	(14) Technical design	1.25
(11) Production	2.00	(15) Engineering	1.05
(12) Statistical	1.43		

Speech communication majors were perceived as having high employment potential in departments or skill areas most dependent upon communication skills. Relations with customers through sales and public relations constitute the highest total package of employable skills. Personnel relations and development was the second major employment category. The basic technical, analytical, production, and distribution functions of the company were not particularly appropriate for speech majors. Generally, these latter jobs are the most stable and secure job areas. Personnel and sales are often the least stable.

Conclusions

1. Speech communication majors who seek employment with major corporations compete with graduates who have technical/engineering training or training in Business Administration. The more training in such areas applicants have, the more qualified they are. To be competitive, speech communication majors must be qualified when possible and at least qualifiable. This means that they must be perceived by employers as being trainable with a minimum of time and cost.

2. University study in certain disciplines specifically designed to increase qualifiability was suggested by the data. These suggested that auxiliary areas of study also reflect employer perceptions of how speech majors most adequately will fit into the company. Major auxiliary fields were marketing, psychology, economics, accounting, and technical studies.

Traditional auxiliary study in the Humanities and Fine Arts may defeat efforts to become qualifiable. Study in some Social Sciences, especially psychology and economics, is helpful. Study in Business Administration is invaluable. Study in this area should be channeled into marketing, accounting, or personnel development. Career development for speech majors needs to be built around communication skills and principles, but potential employers generally see these as presentational rather than as content-oriented areas of study which can be used and applied to solve company problems leading to increased productivity, morale, and profitability. In addition to communication skills and principles, auxiliary classes must be selected with a particular job category in mind. The aim is to qualify for definite jobs and careers.

3. To be employable, speech communication majors may have to overcome traditional stereotypes. They are still viewed as studying voice and diction and platform presentation. Images of useless skills must be displaced by an increased awareness of well-designed academic programs which lead to career development in skills and principles which can increase employee productivity and morale.

4. The theoretical aspects of communication study have not been fully perceived and appreciated by prospective employers. Training in organizational communication, group and interpersonal theory, and persuasion is valuable and marketable in the labor market. Employers do not fully realize and appreciate the impact of these areas.

5. As well as being trained in theoretical aspects of communication, the speech communication major must have presentational skills. These skills included presentational abilities, group leadership and participation effectiveness, and the design, development, and execution of persuasive messages.

Majors need diagnostic skills. They need to be able to use their understanding of theory to discover communication problems.

They need treatment skills. They need to know remedies and means for using remedies to help others avoid and overcome communication problems.

They need to understand communication from a business point-of-view. Most traditional training has been based on the good-man-speaking-well paradigm. A new paradigm must include the communication manager seeing, diagnosing, and treating communication problems and developing communication skills in others who are participating in the corporation setting.

The balance should not completely swing away from developing the oral, presentational skills of our majors. They must be effective communicators. Too much theory without presentational skills will leave our majors in the same shape others find themselves. Engineers and Business Administration majors traditionally need communication skills training. Technical expertise is important, but without presentational skills technical information may not have much impact. The further one is from the center of production the more important communication presentational skills become for success, achievement, and advancement.

6. The training function which speech communication majors can perform is readily apparent. This conclusion, acknowledged by respondents in this study, is reinforced by other studies. The Department of Industrial Administration at Iowa State University compared alumni with graduating seniors. The comparison disclosed that "alumni rated coursework in English and speech significantly higher than did the graduating seniors."[1] Francis W. Weeks discovered that job descriptions in more than thirty business

fields contained specific communication requirements.[2] And Frank R. Hunsicker concludes that despite a trend toward expecting management-level proficiency in written and oral communication many people reach that organizational level without those competencies.[3] All three studies reinforce the findings in this study that speech communication majors can provide valuable skills training for business personnel.

The picture for speech communication major employment is not bleak. But certain adaptations must be made to maximize the employability of majors generally considered to be liberal arts majors with few qualifiable skills.

End notes

[1] Barbara A. Magill, Roger P. Murphey, and Lilian O. Feinberg, "Industrial Administration Survey Shows Need for Communication Study." The American Business Communication Bulletin, 38 (June, 1975), 31-33.

[2] Francis W. Weeks, "Communication Competencies Listed in Job Descriptions," The American Business Communication Bulletin, 37 (December, 1974), 22-34.

[3] Frank R. Hunsicker, "Are We Educating Our Managers to Communicate?" The American Business Communication Bulletin, 37 (December, 1974), 10-15.